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A fresh cause for hand wringing

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The wringing of hands is a peculiar Washington pastime.

It occurs with tiresome regularity among certain liberals whenever President Reagan has the temerity to protect the nation's interests.

The hand wringers lamented the president's decision to strengthen the armed forces against the threat posed by an emboldened Soviet Union.

Their lament intensified when Mr. Reagan acted to assist El Salvador's battle against Marxist insurgents.

The hand wringing became positively frantic as the president attempted to supply U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan freedom fighters, known as "contras."

When Congress rejected all assistance to the "contras," the hand wringers celebrated with glee. But they winced in embarrassment at the subsequent pilgrimage to Moscow by Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega.

Now, the hand wringers' discomfort over Mr. Ortega's journey is fading quickly. A fresh cause for hand wringing has surfaced.

New heights of morbid satisfaction are promised by the revelation that President Reagan directed that there be pre-emptive and punitive action against terrorists.

In view of the terrible casualties suffered in terrorist attacks against U.S. installations in Lebanon, the president's decision to fight back ought to have been welcomed. But such is not the view of the hand wringers. They cringe at the thought of pre-emptive strikes or other harsh anti-terrorist measures — no matter how justified.

While many details of the administration's counterterrorism policy are yet unknown, some facts have become public.

In April of 1984, President Reagan ordered pre-emptive, preventive, and retaliatory actions against terrorists and the nations sponsoring their crimes. Consequently, the government began training and financing foreign groups to serve as U.S. proxies in counterterrorist activities.

In Lebanon, according to *The New York Times*, U.S. intelligence agents were "hot on the heels of" Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a Shiite

leader believed connected with attacks on U.S. facilities.

The Central Intelligence Agency had not decided whether any action was to be taken. But Lebanese intelligence operatives did not hesitate. They hired a hit team to assassinate the Shiite leader.

A car bomb attack against his home in March killed 80 persons. Mr. Fadlallah, however, escaped.

Predictably, the hand wringers blame the CIA for the attack on Mr. Fadlallah's home.

Although it appears that the CIA did not sanction the action, the hand wringers still hold the agency responsible. They ignore the fact that in feudal and volatile Lebanon, Mr. Fadlallah's enemies most likely would have moved against him with or without CIA involvement.

The March car-bomb attack prompted some U.S. intelligence officials to question the wisdom of President Reagan's anti-terrorism directive. It is believed that the dissatisfied officials leaked details of the directive and the car bomb attack to *The Washington Post* — the newspaper that broke the story.

Despite the uproar here, it is expected that the administration will not panic and veer off course. Prudence requires continuation of

anti-terrorism operations.

Obviously, there are serious risks to any anti-terrorist campaign. But a lack of U.S. action would be irresponsible and dangerous. To sit back and do nothing invites additional terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the Americans already dead and wounded at terrorists' hands would remain forever unavenged.

The hand wringers decry the morality of pre-emptive strikes. But international terrorism is a war fought in the shadows. The normal rules of engagement do not apply.

If anything, it would be immoral not to launch a first strike when intelligence reveals preparations for a terrorist act. Allowing the perpetration of the crime would be tantamount to sanctioning the terrorists' murders and maimings.

Under their own faulty logic, the hand wringers would permit themselves to become the victims of assault before attempting to stop the criminal. Not until the crime were in process would they be morally free to defend themselves — if they remained alive.

But on occasion there can be no hesitation in an act of self-defense.

There are times when civilized persons and civilized nations must shoot first and ask questions later.

Stephen Green is a nationally syndicated columnist.